Who's blocking the Chinese Internet? The rise of cybercultures and the generational conflicts in China

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As a decentralised communication technology, the Internet has offered much autonomy and unprecedented communication freedom to the Chinese public. Yet the Chinese government has imposed different forms of censorship over cyberspace. However, the Hong Kong erotic photo scandal reshuffles the traditional understanding of censorship in China as it points to a different territory.

The paper takes the Hong Kong erotic photo scandal in 2008 as a case study and aims to examine the social and generational conflicts hidden in China. When thousands of photos containing sexually explicit images of Hong Kong celebrities were released on the Internet, gossip, controversies and eroticism fuelled the public discussion and threatened traditional values in China.

The Internet provides an alternative space for the young Chinese who have been excluded from mainstream social discourse to engage in public debates. This, however, creates concerns, fear and even anger among the older generations in China, because they can no longer control, monitor and educate their children in the way that their predecessors have done for centuries.

The photo scandal illustrates the internal social conflicts and distrust between generations in China and the generational conflict has a far-reaching political ramification as it creates a new concept of censorship.

Key Words: censorship, China, cyberculture, generational conflicts, moral panics, the Internet, youth culture.

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1. Introduction

At approximately 8:30 p.m. on January 27, 2008, a set of photos depicting sexual images of Edison Chen and Gillian Chung was released on the Hong Kong Discuss Forum. More photos containing Chen and other female celebrities' erotic images were released in the following weeks. It was alleged that someone had stolen these photos from Chen's notebook (by retrieving the already deleted files from the computer's backup system), and the Hong Kong police arrested more than ten persons in February 2008. On April 29, 2009, Sze Ho-chun, the I.T. technician who stole the photos from Chen's notebook, was sentenced to jail, which concluded the legal pursuit of this incident. It is now believed that thousands of copies of the photos were posted online and many are still circulating on the Internet today.

Just as with many other Internet incidents, the Hong Kong photo scandal attracted government censorship. A so-called Websites Correction Campaign,

which aims to 'clean up' pornographic and unhealthy content from the Internet in China, was launched later in 2008. As a result, major global websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were blocked in China as they were deemed to contain 'unhealthy' material. However, a new interpretation of this online policy was given by the government: it was to protect Chinese youth from 'unhealthy and low class materials'.[1]

As one of the chapters looking at the 'National Specific and Cyberculture Communities', I intend to frame my discussion within a global context but with Chinese specific. This chapter critically investigates the social tension within the Chinese public in the Internet age, and argues that online censorship in China is not solely a political product, but as the Hong Kong erotic photo scandal reveals, the suppression of the Internet is also driven by the general public in China. This chapter frames the popular engagement with the erotic elements of the photo scandal against the traditional attitude to sexual desire, and the indigenous history of filial piety and contemporary stereotypes of the Chinese youth. By understanding the uniqueness of sex scandals in the new media age, and how the photo scandal functions as a critical site for the expression and the growth of a youth orientated cyber political culture, this chapter also examines the political ramifications of the clashing new liberalism and traditional values in a developing China. Not only the recent Internet censorship has the unprecedented public support, but the mainstream public in fact relies on the government to maintain their control over the cultural and social capitals, as the scandal and the Internet create concern, fear and even anger among the mainstream public.

2. China and its Great Firewall

The role of the Internet is a hard one to determine for the Chinese government. While China needs the technology to achieve its 'Four Modernisations' (*Si Ge Xian Dai Hua*),[2] the nature of the Internet undermines the authoritarian government's monopoly power and ideological control.[3] As Sun argues, Chinese media in general has always been 'working together with the state, media industries have become key institutions in [the Chinese] society.'[4] The single-party political system underpins the persistent intervention throughout China's Internet development. China's Internet censorship has experienced several comprehensive and multidimensional evolutions:[5] from the traditional blocking and shutting down model,[6] to reaching commercial/censorship deals with western ICTs giants,[7] to the more recent voluntary reporting (self-censorship) system;[8] all of which aim to legitimate the Party's authority and restore the mass media-like propagandist model.[9]

While some authors believe censorship has seriously damaged the democratic potential of the Internet;[10] some others hold a more optimistic view.[11] Studies with more pessimistic views tend to play up the role of the government.[12] Although the process of democratisation and political reform remains largely in the hand of the

government, their top-down analytical approach still underestimates the power that comes from below. Should the Chinese government possess total control over the network, the enforcement of the Internet filtering would not be so inconsistent.[13] There is little doubt that the Internet has become an integrated part of the everydayness of urban Chinese.[14] This inclusion reinforces people's engagement with the technology and the community it creates. Many authors now have turned their attention to the growth of online culture in China.[15] In her analysis of *e gao* (reckless doing), Meng traces this Internet phenomenon as a form of political communication that departs from the conventional political debates model.[16] More importantly, this culture jamming like practice on the Chinese Internet creates an ''underground language' of parody and irony to evade censorship'.[17]

While cyberculture scholars are able to reveal the 'mass power' of the Internet, they tend to overplay the degree of online civil engagement and generalise the public's attitude towards the new technology. In their investigation of the UAE's cyber political engagement, Allagui and Breslow found that, even without censorship, one cannot generalise the Internet as a tool for social inclusion.[18] And more importantly, together with Mangahas's chapter on the Filipino scandal culture,[19] both of their works point out that the Internet is not necessary to be the place for direct political engagements. Even though China has the most Internet users in the world today, the term 'ordinary public' is problematic when only 22.6% of the Chinese population have Internet access.[20] Not only rural and regional populations are missing out, the Internet diffusion rate is significantly lower among the older generations in China.[21] The uneven development among different age groups underpins a new political struggle in the contemporary China. In her thorough study of the youth Internet culture in China, Liu Fengshu argues that,

> We need to view the Internet as a technology in interaction with some key institutions which affect young people's lives in significant ways, such as the state, the family, the school, higher education institutions, the market and the workplace.[22]

Youth interaction with the Internet in general is much more than the simple triangular state-media-public model. But the multidimensional, dynamical, and somewhat complex interactions of Chinese youth and the new technology thus require a broader contextual analytical framework to understand the politics of cyber culture. As the images of the Hong Kong photo scandal were released and viewed, *e gao*, or cultural spoofs, fuelled the online discussions. Fake photos, videos, songs and even fake rumours were created to fulfil people's desire for celebrity dramas. Furthermore, the photo scandal took place at the same time as the heavy snow disaster in southern China during January/February 2008. The snow disaster not only claimed hundreds of lives, but many major freeways and railways were blocked at the time, which prevented millions of rural workers from returning

home to celebrate the traditional Lunar New Year with their families. However, when the first photo, depicting Edison Chen and Gillian Chung Gillian Chung was released online, major news services in Hong Kong and China quickly shifted their main coverage to the photo scandal. The photo scandal occupied the front pages of both *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily* (two of the largest local newspapers in Hong Kong in terms of circulation) for eighteen consecutive days (from 28th January, 2008 to 14th February, 2008).[23]Moreover, in comparison to other major events in China in 2008, such as the Sichuan Earthquake and the Olympic Games, even though the photo scandal seems to contain nothing of significance in terms of politics and economics, but it stands out in many ways. A general Google search of the Chinese characters, *'yan men zhao shi jian'* (the erotic photo scandal) generates about 124 million results,[24] more than twice that of the Beijing Olympic Games (31.6 million results) and the Sichuan Earthquake (27.5 million results) combined. The snow disaster that took place around the same time as the photo scandal only generates about 558,000 Google search results. A more specific Google search (Google Discussion) that only illustrates the results from discussion forums shows that most major Chinese online forums contain discussion about the photo scandal. A Google Discussion search of 'Chen Guanxi Yanmen Zhao Shijian' (Edison Chen's erotic photo incident) generates 11,700 results,[25] and the results come from a diverse range of discussion forums in China, including some of the biggest names such as, Tianya, Baidu Tieba,[26] Club China, ifeng (Phoenix television network's discussion forum), and many local regional forums, such as Sichuan Zaixian (Sichuan Online), and even overseas Chinese forums, such as NZ Chinese BBS (Bulletin Board Services). These results illustrate the widespread publicity and interest from all across China and even around the globe. Furthermore, posts about the scandal often receive tremendous publicity and many hits (reading rate). For example, a post claiming it provides the download link to 1,300 photos on Doclan BBS (Bian Mu Bu Luo), a BBS for dog lovers, received 1,939,904 hits. Chinese Internet users were utilising every possible space on the Internet to pursue and engage in the discussion and development of the photo scandal.

Not only do these figures reflect people's preferences for celebrity dramas over serious national issues; but they show that the photos scandal blatantly explored the traditional taboo of sexual desire, relationships and eroticism. The Internet provides the oxygen for a sexuality and eroticism-driven scandal to grow. These developments create fear and anger within the public, as many parents and teachers were furious with the development of the scandal. The uneasiness among the older generations transformed into a source of suppression against the Internet. As mentioned, a new regulatory measure, the Website Correction Campaign was launched in China as a response to the photo scandal. Since the traditional methods of blocking and covering up are no longer working in the dynamic Internet world, the Website Correction Campaign, shifted its focus to a grass-roots and public level to address the 'concerns' and 'panics' of parents and schools. Targeting the

traditional cultural and educational institutions reflect the government's intention to gain parents' and schools' support to effectively achieve its political interests indirectly.

The government's initiative this time, received tremendous public support from mainstream society, as many parents and school teachers believe the government's initiatives promote a 'healthy, culturally constructive youth'.[27] China's Ministry of Culture even called for online essays in 2010 across all major news websites in China, such as *Sohu, Tencents, Tom, Sina, Rednet, News 163* and all official news websites, to encourage Internet users to express their support for the government's website correction campaign.[28] The positive feedback from mainstream society and their active engagement with the development of this censorship reveals some deeply rooted internal conflicts within the Chinese society. The hope of regulating the Internet comes from below, and the new Web Sites Correction Campaign, as Fung points out, received strong support from the mainstream public:

> Intellectuals, teachers and parents, they all support the government to impose some kind of restrictions online. But apparently those parents would not consider the other side of the story, which is the freedom of information. The Internet was initially created as a government-free platform for everyone to access … [to voice] whatever opinion and ranges of expressions, I guess sometimes we should tolerate ... a wide range of diversity [of opinions]. In this particular case [the photo scandal], those educated parents are really the older generations, and also conservative, and that is why they support the government.[29]

3. Nudity, moral panics and social censorship

The binary growth of the publicity of the photo scandal and the support to the government's new censorship is largely framed by two of the most important cultural/social contexts in China: the suppression of personal desires, and the emphasis of filial piety. The suppression of personal desire in Chinese culture is particularly obvious in the area of sexual desire. The idea of sexual desire and eroticism can always work with fear, embarrassment, lost control and social stigma in China. This is a common perception that is held by many Chinese across the board. The Internet, however, not only provides a platform for political expression, but it provides the opportunity for many young Chinese to explore their desires in the most sensitive areas of the Chinese moralities. The fact that more than 66% of Internet users are under the age of thirty (31% are under 19 years old)[30] underpins a different social perception and moral value. The Chinese government in fact has a strong intention to promote better and more open sexual education as sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV have become an increasing threat to China's

public health.[31] The state's attitude, however, has not been transmitted down to the wider public. Despite the increasing effort from the government and increasingly liberal and open minded attitudes among the younger generations, the campaign of sexual education remains 'limited to official government pamphlets'.[32] Tradition prevails and 'many Chinese people still hold the folk view that sexual desire and activity need to be carefully regulated, otherwise it will be harmful to your health'.[33] Confucianism in China preaches the suppression of passionate love and its doctrine of strict moral and social codes continuous to dominate Chinese attitudes and behaviours toward love and sex up to the present day.[34] Parents and schools are still struggling to develop an open and direct dialog with the younger generations on the topic of sex, relationships and other related issues. As Zhang et al. point out, 'Most Chinese people remain uncomfortable in providing sex education to adolescents. Discussions of sex-related issues … are traditionally taboo in Chinese culture'.[35] Several studies reflect that Chinese parents are either incompetent or reluctant to engage in the discussion of sex with their children, and that less than 3% of Chinese parents can provide a satisfactory answer to their children on sex-related questions.[36] While in the contrast, another survey conducted in 2004 at Nanjing, the capital state of the Jiansu Province found that 70% of Nanjing youth learned sexual knowledge from pornographic websites; and only 1% learned from their parents.[37]

The above information not only sketches out current social perceptions on the topic of sexual behaviour, relationships and gender issues in China, together with the photo scandal, they also address the politics of 'desire'. On the one hand, China has a group of vibrant youth who are curious regarding sexual knowledge and much more liberal and open-minded in terms of sexual behaviours such as premarital sex; but at the same time, the older generations in China, despite the government's encouragement, still find it difficult and embarrassing to teach, discuss and communicate about sex-related issues with the younger generation. The strong demand for but lack of supply of sexual knowledge reinforces the desire among Chinese youth to reach out to new technologies such as the Internet. As Rofel argues in her book *Desiring China*, the ability to express one's desire is a tool to become more cosmopolitan and part of the world.[38] But in a micro and personal sense, desire is a process of seeking what Rofel calls the 'inner selves'.[39] The process of exploring, identifying and categorising these inner selves in fact is a process of identity negotiation and cultural struggle.[40] As Mangahas argues, 'the popularity of scandal brings up the functional role of humours, rumour, news and gossip for creating consensus about reality, the truth, and social values,'[41] Young people view these photos not only to fulfil their desire for sexual knowledge, but knowing that it is a traditional taboo, the photos provide them with an excellent opportunity to evade the social order and even resist it. The process of evasion and resistant creates a new identity that is exclusively defining some of the liberal characteristics of the Chinese youth today. By rejecting and running away from

traditional discipline in suppressing sexual desire, the Chinese youth use the incident and the Internet to distance themselves from traditional values, and play up their willingness of embracement and engagement with the wider world. Furthermore, this process of identity and cultural negotiation in the name of sexual desire and eroticism also reinforces and enlarges cultural struggles between the generations in China. The advent of the photo scandal, therefore, enlarges this gap.

The huge publicity generated by the photo scandal quickly transformed it into *the* dominant social topic at the time. The embarrassing topic of sex became unavoidable, and the Internet has also proven itself to be a realm potentially free from traditional conservatism in China. The incident and the Internet material more generally provide a rare opportunity for many Chinese youths to explore the supposedly filthy and scary territory of sex, eroticism, relationships and personal lifestyle choices. But at the same time, the huge publicity of the explicit sexual content, images and messages that the photo scandal is a process of normalisation, making the cultural taboos of sex and eroticism an everyday discourse throughout the entire social spectrum. On the flip side, this process also angers and frightens the older generations in China as the scandal represents a lack of control, and the collapse of cultural disciplines. Parents and school teachers failed to control the flow of the photos, and they failed to stop the younger generation from viewing and discussing these photos and the rumours behind them. As an incident of 'out-of-control', the moral panics that come with the photo scandal fill the mainstream sphere in China. The public engagement of and exposure to the topic of eroticism and sex in such an open and blatantly manner becomes a major indication to confirm parents' and schools' concerns of the Internet. The idea that the Internet is a filthy space that is full of erotic and violent contents become a shared concerned among the Chinese parents. As the development of the Internet often come with great social controversies and concerns from the parental generations, more extreme view even perceives 'the Net as akin to addictive drugs, in particular opium'.[42] The Chinese government is also too happy to assist the growth of such a negative perception about the Internet by officially defining Internet addiction as a 'psychiatric diseases'.[43] The fact that the photo scandal shifts the public discourses away from a major natural disasters (the Snow disasters), to a melodrama-driven photo scandal, reinforces the concerns about the 'harmful addictive' effect to the youth. As the Internet users were actively (re)distributing, viewing, discussing about the photos and the potential celebrity dramas' behind the photos, in conjunction with the mentioned perceptions of eroticism and sexual desire being erosive and evil, many parents and schools read this Internet-driven photo scandal signalling the moral declines and material corruption among the Chinese youth. And 'there seems to be a shared understanding among Chinese parents that the Internet… is part and parcel of such deterioration of morality among the younger generation'.[44] This 'moral decline' relates to a larger question about identity and cultural ownership in China in the future. The question that Rofel observes about

who is going to represent Chinese culture and how it will be represented[45] becomes relevant in the debate of the photo scandal.

4. The 'spoiled generation' as the new generation in China

Rofel's question on cultural identity, which became the central concern throughout the photo scandal, reveals a major site of struggle between the Chinese youth and their older generations throughout the history of China. The photo scandal played out the global moral panics about new technologies in a Chinese context. Many scholars are critical of the mainstream view on blaming the technologies, as they believe the problem of youth and media lies within the traditional perception of young people. Tapscott notes, 'A commonly held view is that our children are greedy, self-centered, and concerned only about their own possessions and financial success'[46]. However, Tapscott believes the 'conventional wisdom is dead wrong',[47] as blaming the technology is simply a blame game that covers up more serious and urgent social problems.[48] The moral panics and social unrests regarding to young people's usage of the Internet 'relate to much broader concerns, in which the media may in fact have a much less significant – and even contradictory – role '.[49] Even though the academic field commonly accepts that negative images are due to misconceptions concerning the younger generation, this type of stereotype of youth still dominates in everyday life.

Among all the economic reform policies in China, one of the most important, as well as controversial, policies is the One Child Policy. Beside the human rights issue, this population control has had an extensive impact on Chinese society. The traditional Chinese notion of 'big family' has vanished since the introduction of the policy in 1979. Rather than competing with potential siblings, the Chinese who were born after 1979 became the 'only one'. A popular view in mainstream Chinese society today perceives these new generations are problematic and concerning because they are the central focus of their entire families. The preciousness of being the 'only one' not only allows them to possess all in the financial and material priorities, but the indulgence and spoiling by their older generations. Chan et al. argue, 'these children grow up as the pride and joy of adoring parents and grandparents and are beginning to be known as the spoiled generation'.[50] These only children are considered the 'Little Emperor and Little Princess' in Chinese families today. As Reese claims that the one child policy will eventually lead to 'a whole lot of spoiled kids', and this problem in China is 'so acute that it's changing how society functions'[51]. The Cultural Revolution has largely stolen nice childhood memories from generations of Chinese. Now, Mao's children are parents themselves, and they have only one child between partners, so the child is 'their only hope'[52] and is absolutely precious to them. 'Many adults wildly overcompensate in doting on their kids'[53] because the Chinese parents want to give everything they lost during the Cultural Revolution to their 'only hope' in life. The rapid Chinese economic growth also witnessed even more luxurious

lifestyles of these 'only child' generations. Thus, the new generation in China is generally known as soft, mindless, arrogant, and lacking in discipline. The advent of the Internet reinforces and supports these mainstream stereotypes on the Chinese youth.

However, understanding the moral panics about the Internet solely caused by the population control policy is limited. The social criticism of spoiling and 'Little Emperor' phenomenon in fact has a long historical root. As a Confucianism culture, young people are always treated as juniors in both the family and society in China,[54] as the Chinese culture likes to draw an exponential correlation between age and wisdom. As a subdominant social group in the power structures, Chinese youth are taught to fulfil their filial duties[55] : not only do ordinary individuals have to obey the authorities, but, younger generations need to obey the older generations; less wise groups need to obey the wisdom of intellectuals (i.e. students must obey and respect their teachers). While looking after parents and respecting elders should be highly regarded and encouraged in any social setting, the realities behind the seemingly simple 'respecting' and 'caring' often involve excessive suppression of personal desires and expression (such as the suppression of sexual desire) through self-sacrifices and obedience in a traditional context. In a political sense, these traditional guidelines support the government's communist ideas of 'collectivism' and justify the government's suppression on individual expressions and rights. However, the rapid economic development contradicts these traditional and political ideologies, and the new media, provides an alternative public sphere for the young Chinese to explore their own identities by developing their own cultural recognitions and political interpretations in a global context. The photo scandal not only indicates the rise of individualism, but it is an individualist culture that is heavily driven by the rise of consumerism, materialism, and the western capitalism. The celebration of and attraction to pop-stars, the desire for sexual knowledge, and increasing awareness of political issues, those eroticism and sexual contents of the photo scandal are only the wrapping paper of the more intense and dynamic ideological transformation and power (re)negotiation in China today.

The clash of different values and interests is amplified through the so-called 'moral panic' on youth and their favoured media and communication technologies. The long traditional failure to openly and directly address the topic of 'sex' directly resembles the subversive culture that the Chinese youth has played out throughout the photo scandal. The social perception of the photo scandal being 'out-of-control' signifies the increasingly 'disobeying' protests that come from the younger generations, who are using the cyberspace to develop their own social and cultural identities. While in a political sense, the format of the public discussions about the photo scandal as a liberal democratic forum rather than a state led socialist commune and the political protests against and humiliation of the Chinese authorities exemplifies the mainstream view of youth culture as being 'out of control'. The cyber engagement of the photo scandal contained the voices of those

who are socially vulnerable and politically powerless. These representations not only voice the youth's desires for a more open understanding of the natural human self, but also contain their views about the greater social and political development in China. Internet forums where people are downloading the photos and discussing the associated celebrity rumours also became the sites for political activism. For example, a post on 7 February 2008 named 'Edison Chen's erotic photo gate and the Hong Kong stories' on the Tianya Discussion Forum, one of the most popular BBSs in China, supports the general public's criticism of the Hong Kong police and judicial system.[56] This post received a tremendous response in that it received 1,484,646 hits and 2055 responses. Many comments on this post actually argued that the failure of Hong Kong's democratic and judicial system is the result of mainland China's intervention. A participant named *tibbs* believes democracy is vanishing in Hong Kong. Some others extended *tibbs*'s idea and argued that the photo scandal reflects the decline of social and judicial justice in Hong Kong, and thus the dream of peacefully re-uniting with Taiwan has become impossible as Hong Kong has set a bad example and proves the failure of the One Country, Two Systems framework. The online discussion of the photo scandal, which is supposedly a celebrity melodrama, gradually transformed itself into a social and political discussion. This process is a political inclusion as those who were politically powerless, financially struggling, and culturally excluded, now, through the 'erotic' engagement with the photo scandal, through emotional outbursts over celerity affairs, extend their dissatisfaction and protest from below, and evade the conventional political communication formats that are guarded by the mainstream establishments.

The cyber political activism of the photo scandal also defines the government's intention to work with the traditional establishments, and the Web Site Correction Campaign works as a justification and protection for their political assets. Blaming new media and the youth are in fact making the media 'as scapegoat [and] can be blamed for social unrest, crime, breakdown of the family, political apathy, thereby simplifying and trivialising the underlying social problems'.[57] The concerns and panics about the youth and the Internet are framed by more profound and serious social, economic and political elements. At one level, it is about the immediate ideological contests and social unrests that are triggered by a subject (sexual desire) that is feared and avoided by the traditions. But on the broader perspective, it is a matter of future representation and power transition. Due to the development of the Internet, the ideological departure of the Chinese youth today, from conservatism to liberalism, from socialism to capitalism and from localism to globalism, are proving to be a greater fear to the older Chinese generations than the erotic photos themselves, because this ideological transformation underpins the serious question of China's identity on the global stage. As Rofel points out,

> Struggles over cultural citizenship are contests over new schemes of hierarchical difference, over who represents the cultural competence to carry China into the future and to create wealth and power for the nation under neoliberal capitalism.[58]

The political contests and struggles of the photo scandal are not merely about the justification of the CCP's authority; this particular struggle is also on the cultural front, which is dominated by concepts of identity representation and creation. Who is going to represent China and how China as a country and a civilisation will be represented in the new global order are in fact more urgent concerns that trigger the widespread controversies of the photo scandal. The cybercultures associated with the photo scandal ran against traditions by revealing things and engaging into topics that are feared by the traditional values. Therefore, the photo scandal is perceived to be 'out of control'; not only did the government fail to stop the photo distribution, but parents and teachers were unable to prevent the youth viewing and discussing the photos and their melodramas. The active cyber engagement signifies the power of the Internet as the site of an alternative public sphere in China. The fact that no one in China at the time can be immune from the airing of the scandal and its ideas of sexual desire and eroticism also illustrates the relevance of the cybercultures to the offline everydayness in China. The scandal reveals a youth-based cyberculture that is growing stronger online and actively searching for desired information; but at the same time, there is also a strong counter-force opposing this type of cyberculture throughout the entire social hierarchy in China.

5. Power transition in China

Mao Zedong has once famously said:

> The world is yours, as well as ours, but eventually, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you.[59]

Speaking in front of a group of young Chinese students studying in Moscow, Mao's words in 1957 seems to become more relevant to China than ever before. Writing in an age of transformation, we are lucky enough to witness the rise of a new generation of Chinese in that the post-1980s Chinese (who are the first generation of Chinese born during the economic reform years) are now gradually taking over the country. However, the power transition has just begun and it is far from completion. China today is experiencing a generational and ideological transformation. Although generational transition is a natural trend and an on-going process, in China this time it is not simply about the elders passing on to the youth, and the Chinese experience in the past thirty years proves this particular

generational transition is a controversial and complicated one: it is the transition from a socialistic China to a post-socialistic China, from collective values to individualistic values, and from localisation to globalisation.[60] The complexities of this particular generational transformation are not simply about the older handing over power to the younger, but it is more like conservatism handing over to a new liberalism (with a strong western capitalistic flavour); it is about the reshuffle of national and cultural values; and this has proven to be problematic and difficult. As Sima and Pugsley correctly point out, 'in this postsocialist China, individual expression, achievement and pleasure have taken over the arguably 'collective interest' mentality that marked the older, Mao generation'.[61] The changing materialistic environment forces many Chinese, especially those who have grown up during this process, to re-think their social and political perceptions. The rise of a 'me culture' among the young Chinese netizens, in that self-expression and individualism have become the driving forces for the successful diffusion of the Internet; and more importantly, the adoption of individualism and consumerism 'suggests a major departure from previous generations'.[62] The significance of self-expression and connecting with others who share similar ideas and opinions for an exclusive network lies within the differences from tradition. The ideas of individualism and focusing on self-expression and searching for self-identity have undermined the traditional Chinese values and the Party's political ideology. Furthermore, the 'me culture' resonates with western democratic values rather than the Communist collective ideal. The changing communication culture among the young Chinese construct a sharp division with older generations.

However what is more concerning, or actually frightening, to the older Chinese generation is not simply the superior or different life experience the post-80s generations possess; rather, it is that the new generations seem to possess greater wisdom in terms of new technologies than most of the older generations. As Tapscott argues, 'for the first time in history, children are more comfortable, knowledgeable and literate than their parents about an innovation central to society'.[63] Sima and Pugsley also agree and argue that within a Chinese context, young Chinese today are 'more affluent and better educated than their parents' generation'.[64] It seems the new generation, or what Tapscott calls the 'Net generation'[65], and what the Chinese call the 'post-80s, -90s and 2000 generations', have already bypassed the previous generations in many ways. These interpretations develop a sharp contrast with the commonly held 'spoiled generations' view by the older generations in China. Although this is not a phenomenon exclusive to China, this trend is more obvious and significant in China. The pre-80s generations not only have been financially damaged by tragedies like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but these tragedies have taken educational opportunities from these Chinese. Many people born during the Cultural Revolution have hardly completed schooling. This relatively lower educational level becomes a major impediment to them mastering

the Internet and computing technologies. As an incident being 'out of control', the photo scandal illustrates the very fear of the older generations regarding the Internet in the sense that they are unable to control their children as their ancestors have done for thousands of years. The notion of filial piety in itself is evolving in China today. Blind obedience and personal suppression are no longer symbolising the respect to elders, but the current technological development challenges and even subverts the long traditional discipline in China. The Internet, in many ways, encourages 'disobedient' minds in China. In the photo scandal, the traditional establishments lost their authorities of being the mainstream voice of public communications. The agendas and interests of young netizens, however, drove the development of public discourses. This changing power balance further reinforces the fears and moral panics about the new technologies and ideologies, and the nature of the photo scandal and its associated cybercultures further reinforce the cultural and political intrusion that the Internet has brought to China. As the cybercultures are providing liberal ideas to their Chinese users today, co-existing but competing values underpin the bitter struggle between the two camps in the new media era.

6. Conclusion

Labelling subcultures as 'rebel' and 'resistance' against the mainstream is common.[66] The rise of cybercultures and the censorship attempts associated with it are another example of a struggle between the establishment and rebels. However, in the case of the photo scandal, the idea of 'establishment' and 'rebels' are not defined by political or economic power; this time, traditional morality come into play, and the Internet becomes the site of a generational struggle instead of a class one. The rise of the youth-orientated cyberculture reflects a dynamical grassroots political culture in China. The photo scandal shows that political communication can take place in a non-conventional format. The seemingly emotional outburst, excessive expression and the 'irresponsible' cultural reproduction are in fact a form of social inclusion and a process of public rationalisation. But the photo scandal also makes us aware of the multidimensional control mechanism, which does not solely come from the government.

The conflicts between the Chinese youth and older generation have a far reaching consequence in terms of policy setting. The nature of the photo scandal and the public response to the scandal over the Internet has created much discomfort for the ruling older generations in China. Not only can they not avoid discussing the topic of sex and eroticism, the older generations in China also fail to control the engagement of the younger generation in exploring the photo scandal through the Internet. The photo scandal encourages a grass-roots subversive and disobedient culture by inviting the voicing of opinion from a group of Chinese whose ideas are often undermined due to stereotypical beliefs and perceptions. One must understand the social movement among the Chinese youth in relation to this

social group's political and historical potential. As mentioned, youth struggles and movements often can be transformed into mass political campaigns and movements; Chinese youth have demonstrated their strong and consistent subversive potential throughout history; their 'heated mind' can transform into radical political and social movements, which demonstrate the political potential and practices of Chinese youth. The rise of the Internet creates further complications and dilemmas for the Chinese government in its attempts to exert control and authority over this unpredictable social group. The phenomenal publicity of the photo scandal confirms the active nature of the youth culture in China, but at the same time, the photo scandal also reveals the growing and strong counter-youth and counter-cyber culture.

It seems that the Chinese government is able to capture the general opinion among the mainstream public in China. In order to legitimate its regulation and intervention in the online world, the government is utilising intergenerational conflicts that the Internet culture has revealed. The photo scandal provides an excellent case study to critically examine the political motivations and strategies of the Chinese government in the new media era. The photo scandal illustrates how mainstream Chinese society is utilising the internal contradictions of the youth online culture to justify its intervention with the assistance of the state. The incident triggers the appearance of external social forces that are constantly in battle with those socially and ideologically privileged values. The on-going battle between the traditional and popular, conservative and liberal, old and young, as illustrated by the photo scandal, traditional codes can interfere with the growth of cybercultures as much as the government.

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